

# EXHIBIT M



POLITICS

## New law requires clergy in Washington to report child abuse

BY: JERRY CORNFIELD MAY 2, 2025 1:55 PM



Gov. Bob Ferguson, at podium, goes to shake hands with state Sen. Noel Frame, D Seattle, at the signing of a bill to make clergy mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect, on May 2, 2025 in Olympia. At center is Mary Dispenza, a founding member of the Catholic Accountability Project. (Photo by Jerry Cornfield/Washington State Standard)

Religious leaders in Washington will be required to report child abuse or neglect, even when it is disclosed in confession, under a new law signed by Gov. Bob Ferguson on Friday.

“Protecting our kids, first, is the most important thing. This bill protects Washingtonians from abuse and harm,” Ferguson said, noting Washington is one of five states in which clergy are not currently mandated reporters.

It took Sen. Noel Frame, D-Seattle, three years to get the bill to the governor's desk. Making sure disclosures during confidential conversations between a penitent and religious leader were not exempt was critical, she said.

"You never put somebody's conscience above the protection of a child," she said.

[Senate Bill 5375](#) passed by margins of 64-31 in the House and 28-20 in the Senate. It takes effect July 27.

It adds clergy members to [the state's list of individuals legally required to report](#) suspected child abuse to law enforcement or the Department of Children, Youth and Families.

Clergy would join school personnel, nurses, social service counselors, psychologists, and many others with a duty to report when they have "reasonable cause to believe that a child has suffered abuse or neglect."

A "member of the clergy" is defined in the legislation to cover any regularly licensed, accredited, or ordained minister, priest, rabbi, imam, elder, or similarly positioned religious or spiritual leader.

While disclosures in confession or other religious rites where the clergy member is bound to confidentiality are not exempt, religious leaders will retain their privilege to not be compelled to testify in related court cases or criminal proceedings.

More than half the states make clergy mandatory reporters and most exempt what is heard in a confessional. Washington will join [several states](#), including New Hampshire and West Virginia where such conversations are not exempt.

"It says the church is not above the law, especially when it comes to protecting children," said Mary Dispenza, a founding member of the [Catholic Accountability Project](#) and member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "We know children will be safer as a result of passing this law."

Removing the confessional privilege proved the most divisive provision in legislative debates.

It's the chief reason the [Washington State Catholic Conference](#) opposed the legislation. They said it would force priests to break the seal of confession, considered a sacred promise to never reveal any of the information disclosed.

Most Republican lawmakers were opposed to including the confessional, too. They argued in hearings and floor debates that abusers would do more harm because they would no longer be able to freely confide and seek forgiveness.

Keeping the confessional in the bill did not give Ferguson pause.

“Not for me,” he said. As a Catholic, “I’m very familiar with it. Been to confession, myself. I felt this was important legislation for protecting kids.”

Frame has said her push for the legislation began after reading an [InvestigateWest account](#) of a lawsuit alleging a Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation in Spokane covered up abuse of children by an elder.

Momentum grew as Catholic and Jehovah’s Witness survivors shared their stories with lawmakers and argued for including the confessions, she said.

“This is going to protect children in other religious communities, especially Jehovah’s Witnesses,” said Marino Hardin of Seattle, who worked to pass the law on behalf of abuse victims. “I believe that a lot more children will not fall through the cracks.”



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JERRY CORNFIELD [✉](#) [𝕏](#)

Jerry Cornfield joined the Standard after 20 years covering Olympia statehouse news for The Everett Herald. Earlier in his career, he worked for daily and weekly papers in Santa Barbara, California.

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